# Are Pennsylvania German Dialect Speakers Illiterate?

**By DR. HEINZ KLOSZ**

It has sometimes been pointed out that the preservation of the Pennsylvanish tongue tends to retard the cultural progress of the Pennsylvania Germans and to keep them in a state of backwardness and even of complete illiteracy. Bilingualism implies cultural inferiority—such is the slogan of many who honestly try to serve the best interests of their people by helping them to get rid of the old folk-speech.

Their viewpoint is not confirmed by the statistician. Let us cast a glance at the official figures concerning illiteracy in the U. S. among the native whites of native parentage in 1920. These figures are not influenced by the recent immigration from Europe or by the colored element.

The average percentage for Pennsylvania at large is 0.8. This exceedingly low figure or—to put it the other way—this exceedingly high standard, is due to the county of Philadelphia, i.e. to a metropolitan area, where the figure is 0.3. But next comes Lehigh county, good old Lecha, where the percentage is 0.5—the lowest figure and the best showing for any county outside of Philadelphia. Strangely enough, Lehigh is, to this day, largely bilingual. There is no other county, with the possible exception of purely rural Snyder county, with as high a percentage Pennsylvanish speakers. Apparently their knowledge of the old tongue did not hamper their progress in literacy.

Looking to the other pole we find that Montour ranks highest in illiteracy, the percentage being 3.4. Now Montour is today one hundred percent English-speaking and the influx of Pennsylvania German blood was never great. The second-highest rank in illiteracy is held by two counties, both of which count 2.6% illiterates among their native whites of native parentage: Venango and Bedford. Venango is an Anglo-Saxon county. Bedford is largely Pennsylvania German, but here the dialect has all but gone out and if it were true that the extinction of the dialect means educational progress we should expect Bedford to rank high above Lehigh.

I shall proceed by setting aside, as a separate group, the figures on illiteracy from those counties where the dialect continues to be spoken by a considerable proportion of the inhabitants and to compare their record with those Pennsylvania German counties where the dialect has practically disappeared. First then the "Pennsylvanish" counties:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Berks | 1.0 | Monroe | 1.3 |
| Bucks | 0.6 | Montgomery | 0.7 |
| Carbon | 1.4 | Northampton | 1.0 |
| Centre | 1.0 | Northumberland | 0.9 |
| Dauphin | 1.0 | Schuylkill | 1.0 |
| Lancaster | 0.9 | Snyder | 2.1 |
| Lebanon | 1.5 | Union | 1.3 |
| Lehigh | 0.5 | | |

And now the Counties where a majority of the inhabitants is of Pennsylvania German stock, the dialect, however, having all but died out:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Adams | 1.5 | Fulton (about 40% Penna. German) | 2.2 |
| Bedford | 2.6 | Perry | 1.4 |
| Cumberland | 1.0 | Somerset | 2.0 |
| Franklin | 1.4 | | |

While in the latter group the average for seven counties is 1.7, the average for 15 non-anglicized counties is 1.1. Making allowance for the extraordinarily small degree of illiteracy met with in Philadelphia county we may safely claim that where the dialect lives on the record is a little better than the average for the rest of the state, outside of Philadelphia, while the Anglicized counties make a rather poor showing, comparatively speaking.

Speaking comparatively, indeed! For even what constitutes a bad record in the Anglicized Counties of Pennsylvania may mean a brilliant land mark of progress in certain other states. Besides the Pennsylvania Germans we have other states where non-English languages are spoken by native white groups of long standing. As early as during the colonial period two Latin folk-islands came into being within the present boundaries of the United States, a French island in Southern Louisiana and a Spanish island in Northern New Mexico. Both have kept their ancestral tongues, the French and Spanish, respectively, with the utmost tenacity. Still, in Louisiana the English language is now beginning to drive out its competitor. But even now there is hardly a single locality in Louisiana, originally French, where at least the adult population is not bilingual. This was true still more in 1920. And now let us look at the record of some of the French counties of Southern Louisiana. And mind you: these figures are not "colored" by conditions prevailing among the colored population, or among the foreign-born, since native whites only are embraced:

**LOUISIANA**

Illiteracy among native whites of native parentage in certain designated parishes (1920):

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Evangeline | 44.5 | Terrebone | 31.9 |
| St. Martin | 44.0 | Lafayette | 31.4 |
| Vermilion | 40.7 | St. Landry | 31.2 |
| Lafourche | 39.9 | Assumption | 27.1 |
| Acadia | 37.7 | | |

Even those French parishes which show a more favorable record have percentages like 19.1 (Point Coupee), 14.6 (Plaquemines), 17.9 (St. Mary) and 12.6 (St. John the Baptist). The last-named parish contains a huge proportion of German Blood; here, Germans settled during the colonial period (1721) but were Frenchified in due course of time. Still, their record is somewhat better than that of most other French counties (parishes).

And here are the corresponding figures for some of the Spanish counties of New Mexico:

**NEW MEXICO:**

Illiteracy among native whites of native parentage in certain designated counties (1920):

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Bernalillo | 11.6 | Sta. Fe | 17.7 |
| Dona Ana | 18.3 | Socorro | 17.5 |
| Guadalupe | 14.4 | Taos | 16.6 |
| Rio Arriba | 26.0 | Torrance | 12.8 |
| San Miguel | 21.1 | Valencia | 21.3 |
| Sandoval | 23.6 | | |

That is almost as bad as la petite France in Southern Louisiana, don't you think so? But lest we be charged with unkindness towards the Latin-Americans within our gates, let us shift out attention and switch over to a purely Germanic region. The interior parts of Kentucky and Tennessee are inhabitated by people of almost pure Anglo-Saxon stock, God-abiding though—so the tale runs—not always law-abiding. The "stem" or tribe of the Hill-Billies is well enough known but perhaps not all of my readers are prepared to get the following account of their illiteracy:

**TENNESSEE**

Illiteracy among native white of native parentage (1920).

15.0% and more:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Carter | 16.5 | Jackson | 16.0 |
| Cocke | 17.2 | Macon | 22.0 |
| Hancock | 18.8 | | |

Between 10.0 and 14.9%:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Anderson | 12.6 | Loudon | 12.7 |
| Campbell | 10.8 | Marion | 10.0 |
| Cannon | 10.4 | Monroe | 12.4 |
| Claiborne | 13.9 | Overton | 12.2 |
| Clay | 14.0 | Polk | 13.6 |
| De Kalb | 11.8 | Pickett | 13.8 |
| Fentress | 15.4 | Scott | 12.4 |
| Grainger | 12.8 | Sevier | 13.2 |
| Grundy | 11.7 | Sullivan | 10.5 |
| Hardin | 10.3 | Trousdale | 12.0 |
| Perry | 12.3 | Unicoi | 10.5 |
| Hawkins | 14.1 | Union | 12.5 |
| Humphreys | 10.1 | Van Buren | 16.6 |
| Jefferson | 10.9 | Wayne | 11.5 |
| Johnson | 15.8 | White | 10.3 |
| Lake | 10.5 | (The State | 7.3) |
| Lewis | 11.5 | | |

**KENTUCKY**

Illiteracy among native whites of native parentage (1920).

15.0% and more:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Breathitt | 17.5 | Leslie | 21.4 |
| Clay | 16.5 | Martin | 17.4 |
| Knott | 18.5 | Pike | 16.9 |

Between 10.0 and 14.9%:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Adair | 11.0 | Knox | 11.7 |
| Allen | 10.9 | Lawrence | 10.4 |
| Bath | 10.0 | Lee | 13.6 |
| Bell | 12.5 | Letcher | 14.3 |
| Butler | 10.5 | McCreary | 13.4 |
| Carter | 10.6 | Magoffin | 13.6 |
| Casey | 11.5 | Metcalfe | 13.2 |
| Cumberland | 13.8 | Muhlenberg | 10.0 |
| Edmonson | 11.2 | Owsley | 13.2 |
| Elliott | 13.0 | Perry | 14.0 |
| Estill | 13.1 | Powell | 11.9 |
| Floyd | 16.0 | Rockcastle | 13.5 |
| Harlan | 12.5 | Todd | 12.4 |
| Jackson | 10.0 | Wayne | 14.4 |
| Johnson | 11.2 | (The State | 7.0) |

At last we have the proper background for the Pennsylvania German, the speaker of "Pennsylvanish." Outclassing the Louisiana Frenchman, the New Mexico Spaniard and the Anglo-Saxon Hill-Billy, he has made for himself an enviable record which he, unfortunately, is not wont to draw on very heavily. Condescendingly he may look down upon those backwards "stems" or tribes, for he has managed to preserve his old tongue without falling back in general cultural progress. The most French parish of Louisiana is the most illiterate district in the States at large, the most "German" (i. e. Pennsylvanish) county of Pennsylvania leads the commonwealth with regard to literacy with the exception of Philadelphia. There have been set up, during recent years, folk schools among the Hill Billies in order to link up their inherited gifts, especially their folk-art with the standard requirements of a present day elementary education, adapted to the peculiar conditions of the inner Appalachians. Let me conclude that the Pennsylvania German is even more entitled to have his own folk-school where his peculiar crafts and cunning, his speech and lore, are treated in a more considerate way than heretofore granted to them. At the same time no branch of study, the cultivation of which forms part of the accepted standard of American education, would thereby be neglected.

# En wennich Neiichkeete vun der Lang Schwamm Kaerrich

Am Sunndaag, den 22schte Moi hot en besonderer Gottesdienscht schtattg'funne, naemlich die Einweihung vun me Parish Haus. Die zwee Parre, Ehrwuerden Englert un Bond un ihr Leit hen en gut Waerrick verricht. Schunn deel Yohr zerick hot die Ladies Aid Society aag'fange Geld zu sammle, graad far so en Zweck wie des. Un dann hot die Sunndaag Schul aa eig'schtimmt un nau schteht en Gebei dart, dass eeniche Gemee Schtolz fiehle kennt damit. Des find mer net alle Daag. Geb's yuscht de Weibsleit in die Hand far ebbes gutes zu mache un du kannscht dich druf verlosse, dass alles recht geht.

Sie hen gedenkt es waer en scheeni Sach, wann sie Sehne vun der Gemee eilaade daete far zu schwetze. Wann all die Sehne kumme waere, denk ich waere sie heit noch net faerdich zu schwetze! Wie's waar hen sie alles gut aus gedeelt g'hat.

Am Marye Gottesdienscht hot der Prof. W. F. Long vun der Franklin un Marshall College g'schwetzt, un nochmiddaags der Ehrw. C. A. Butz vun Bethlehem un der Dr. W. P. Long vun Weatherly, un owets der Parre Jacob Wagenhorst vun Trexlertown.

Am Owet Gottesdienscht hen die zwee Parra es Gebei eigeweiht un en Grupp vun yunge Leit hen en Schpiel iwwer die Ruth gewwe. Es waar alles schee gewest.

Ya, sie hen aa g'sunge. Der Robert Fritsch hot schun viel Yohre dart vorg'sunge. Er un die Schuberte hen iwwer en hunnert Yohr in dem Amt gedient. Un sell waar en grossi Ehr! Der alt Schubert hot 52 Yohr gedient un der Fritch ebbes wie 40 Yohr un gschwische drin hot em Schubert sei Soh Edwin viele Yohre lang gedient.

Die Lang Schwammer Gemee iss eens vun de eltschte Gemeene dorum. Die erscht Kaerrich iss im Yohr 1748 gebaut warre, awwer mer wisse dass en Gemee schun meh als zehe Yohr zuvor dart waar. Weil's ken Coetus-Gemee waar bis dass der Johannes Helfrich Breddiger dart waar, so sin die Sache ewwe net so genau ufg'schriwwe warre. Die zwett iss gebaut warre im Yohr 1790. Die schteht aa nimmi. Die Kaerrich wu alleweil uf em Baerrick schteht iss die dritt. Sie iss in 1852 gebaut warre un iss eens vun de schenschte Colonial Kaerriche uf weit un breet. In 1852 hot der Parre W. A. Helfrich nein Daage zugebrocht 's Geld zu sammele. 'S aerscht waare die Leit net eeschtimmich gewest iwwer die Sach. Awwer bis der yung Parre mol all die Leit g'sehne hot g'hat, waar ken ee Schtimm degege gewest. Nau wammer draa denkt dass des nei Gebei, wu yuscht eigeweiht iss warre, ball $9000 gakoscht hot un die gans Kaerrich yuscht $5777, so kann mer sehne wie die Zeite sich verennert hen.

Eb die alt Kaerrich nunner gerisse iss warre in 1852, am vierte un am fimfte Moi, iss eens vun de schenschte Gottesdienschte g'halte warre, as zu hawwe sin in re gemeescheftliche Gemee. Die zwee Parre hen en "Union" Abendmahl mit nanner g'halte. Der Parre Jeremiah Schindel un der Parre Wm. A. Helfrich hen des geduh. Do waar ken enghaerzicher Geischt gewest. Der Helfrich saagt in seim Buch, dass es en wunnervolles Bild gewest waer—400 Glieder uf ihre Knie zu sehne dart varm allmechtiche Gott! Ich denk so en Erfahrung waer genung far'n richticher Geischt in en yedes Haerz zu blanse. Des waar der Geischt vun unsere Vorvetter! O faith of our fathers! Des waar en heilichi Sach: wie en Pingschtfescht Erfaahrung! So ebbes sehnt mer net alle Daag.

Die Lang Schwammer Kaerrich hot viel gute Sache der Welt ausgedeelt. Aus daere Gemee sin 14 Parre, 19 Dokter, 5 Lawyers (eener en Associate Judge vun Berks County), en Zaahl vun College Professors, Schulmeeschter, Business Leit, Schreiwer, Musikante, u.s.w. ausgange. Mer schreiwe mol schpaeter noch meh iwwer die Sache. Do iss en Gemee die net far nix gelebt hot. Mer wunnert oft: "Was hot dann die Gemee geduh?" In zwee hunnert Yohr hot's manches gewwe, was Lobes waert iss. Un wu so en Fundament gelegt iss, do muss es gut Werk doch gewiss weiter geh.

Der Schreiwer hot eig'fiehrt in seinre Red, wie ihm alles so fremm scheint, awwer geh mol 40 Yohr vum me Blatz weck un sehn was happent! —Ya, en gross Deel vun de alte Bekannte ruhe yo schun uf em alte Kaerrichhof! Siess iss ihre Ruhe dart! Awwer wie betriebt des em's Haerz. Was bleibt dann noch uf daerer Welt? Doch wer wott's Gedechtniss devun ufgewwe? In unsere Gedanke gehne mer oft iwwer den Weg, den mer darrich die Yohre gange sin. Vier Generations vun de Voreltere ruhe dart uf sellem alte Gottesacker! Dart iss aa unser Haerz. Dart liegt was unser Aafang waar—in so viel Schticke. Mir gehne yo aa em Ziel entgege. Wie bald warre mer aa dart ruhe. Do geht alles zum End. Awwer es iss ee Sach, wu bleibt. Die Eltere hen's g'funne. Mer hoffe mir finne's aa!

—PARRE C. A. BUTZ,
Bethlehem, Pa.